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The Cayapa Indians
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By Max Heimann

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[Title page]

THE CAYAPA INDIANS*

by
Max Heimann

101 In the far north west of the Ecuadorian Republic there is a river
131 named the Santiago. Near the village of Borbon it is joined by
133 one of its tributaries, the Cayapa River. The Cayapa Indians, a
161 harmless tribe consisting of no more than 2500 persons, live on the upper reaches of the Cayapa River and around its sources.

000 I have never been able to understand why they are called "uncivilized" and "savage." Would it be because they dress more simply, more comfortably, more suitably and cheaply than we European fashion slaves? Or would it be because they speak their own language, unknown to us, and because they do not know how to read and write and do not stuff their heads with the dead weight taught in schools and called "education"? Or even, would it be because they have other customs and manners as well as different moral concepts?

181 One thing is certain--the Cayapa are happy people, because they are more satisfied with their lot than we Europeans, who are so demanding and feel so superior with our conceit in our sham civilization, in the clothes prescribed for us by the tyrants of "fashion" and in the "wisdom" acquired in schools.

439 They frequently come to town in small groups of five to 20
484 persons. I have seen them many hundreds of times, but again and
142 again I am delighted when I meet these small, but well-built and sturdy [282] figures. The men are not taller than 150-160 cm. (Translator--5 ft. to 5ft. 4 in.), while the women are barely 140 cm. (Translator--4 ft. 8 in.). Their skin is copper brown in color.

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114 * The author a business man, lived in Tumaco (southwest Colombia) for 35 years (1895-1930) and was German Vice-Consul for the Departamento Nariño from 1907 to 1920. Although he never actually visited Cayapa villages, he did have occasions to see and question groups of them "many hundreds of times," on their frequent visits to Tumaco. Apart from this, several of his employees have been in Cayapa villages and have given him reports. (K. Th. Preuss).

142 Their bodies are clean, and I have never seen a Cayapa who had a
[515] rash or boils, and only few who had scars. Their hair is thick, bristly
[302] and dull black in color; the beardless men wear it semi-long to the nape of the neck, while the women let it hang loose and open so that it not only covers their backs and ears, but in part even their fore-
291 heads and cheeks. Their clothes are extremely modest. The men wear a sleeveless, shirt-like, loose gown, which usually reaches to the hips only, but is sometimes longer, reaching to the knees, in which case it seems to be the holiday attire, and it looks richer having a border of differently colored cloth. These clothes are made of thin, very bright and cheap cotton materials. On special occasions
292 they even dress in gala clothes, which differ from their every-day
531 clothes in that they are decorated with straight lines or zig-zag de-
301 signs of shells. In addition they may deck themselves out in their
177 most precious ornaments consisting of two to ten long necklaces made of multi-colored glass beads as well as (at least from their point of view) especially beautiful neck and arm ornaments consisting of the cardboards 6 cm. wide so well known to all of us, with a whole gross of ordinary porcelain shirt-buttons on each just as they were delivered by the European manufacturers. But even among them there are
292 dandies and fashion hounds, who manage to pick up a useless old
177 black waistcoat somewhere, which they then decorate with a lot of white shells and buttons, wearing it as a sort of open vest over their red or blue shirts. But imagine the happiness of the young man who in addition to this splendor, has managed to acquire a stiff round felt hat. No matter how shabby, battered, greasy and much too small it may be on his fat pate with the thick mop of hair, he is proud of his elegance and would not change places even with the governor. The
622 Gobernador de los Cayapas (Governor of the Cayapas) is one of their
177 chiefs, of which each village or district has one—yes of course—he
292 is a great gentleman—he can afford it—he not only wears a shell
301 bedecked waistcoat over his red cotton shirt, but over it still another long, black morning-coat, which he has bought from or been given by Don So-and-so, because it had become too tight, unfashionable or shabby for the latter. And around his neck and wrists he wears especially wide cardboards with buttons in proportion to his dignity. Naturally it would be considered unseemly for a governor to come to town without suitable head-gear, even if it be only a self-made straw panama hat for lack of a black felt hat. But even he does not wear
[293] trousers or shoes, which are considered superfluous and burdensome; instead he carries in his right hand a wooden stick five feet long with a silver knob as a symbol of his position and power.

301 The women's clothes are much simpler and scantier than the
291 men's. They simply consist of a piece of cotton cloth dyed blue, black or red, about two yards long, which is tightly wrapped around the lower part of the body and is tied at the waist with flax cord. The upper part of the body, up to the waist, and legs, from the feet to the knees, remain totally uncovered. By way of ornaments they wear long strings of tiny colored beads around the wrists and long, colored bead necklaces around the neck, as well as self-made mother-of-pearl amulets and some of the more well-to-do women even wear strings of silver coins. Bead necklaces are also
[584] worn in large numbers by young men during the period of their betrothal. In other words the women's wardrobes are not a serious worry to the husbands. Up to their sixth year, children run about completely naked apart from some bead or button ornaments likewise hung on them.

481 The men walk ahead of their wives, a long leaf-shaped paddle
562 in one hand and a small net-like basket containing as little as
482 possible in the other, while the heavily laden women trot behind them with short, swaying steps, along with the children. Even from their visits to town one can observe that the woman has been given the role of the load and work-horse.

482 On her back the woman carries a heavily laden basket which is strapped around her forehead, while the youngest child sits thrust out in riding position on her hip, with the mother's arm holding him tightly. In her other hand she usually carries a bundle and a cooking pot.

574 One of their first visits in town is at the local priest's. The
797 latter claims that the Cayapa are Catholics. But this is not true.
301 Probably they only go to the priest because he seeks to prove the blessings of the Catholic Church by means of small presents and holy coins, which, one must admit, do look very pretty worn around the neck. At home they have their own cult.

481 Their happiness is apparent when they leave the vicarage, be-
198 cause they have again received presents. They amble down the business streets, curious, amazed and admiring as they go from one shop to the other. "Chindo, Kachindo, compadre?" the gutter-snipes call after them. (The first two words are in the Cayapa language, the third is Spanish; the sentence means: "Where'ye going, fellow?") "Caminando, viendo, comprando, compadre"
[91] ("going for a walk, seeing, buying, brother") the men answer politely, but in very poor Spanish.

437 They have sold the new small canoes, tree bark mats
501 (damajaguas), palm-leaf fans, rubber and rolls of liana (these are
285 used in the construction of bamboo huts to tie up the palm-leaves
283] on the [284] roofs and for some other purposes in lieu of string),
which they have brought from the villages and with the cash they
have earned they now make their small purchases. They have
few wants and do not need much: a few feet of cotton cloth, a
chopping knife, some salt, a small mirror, glass beads, fish hooks,
[411] powder and small shot for the old muzzle-loader which a few of
them may own. This would be all their heart desires. It is little,
even very little, and yet it takes long, even very long, until they
have made their choice and finally decided to buy. First they
talk it over among themselves in their guttural and sónorous lan-
guage and then they start bargaining, and then they count out their
money slowly and cautiously; finally having managed to get the
[462] desired goods, they packed them into the nearly full basket car-
ried by the wife. The women and girls timidly hide behind their
576 menfolk. When spoken to, they do not answer, although they
571 understand sufficient Spanish. Their jealous menfolk have strictly
[191] forbidden them to enter into conversation with men of other races
or tribes. They draw back bashfully. But if the husband is not
present, only the mother or brother, the women become very
loquacious, especially when their tongue has been untied by a
small present—a mirror, necklace or something of the kind. And
they are happy beyond words if you caress their little child, who
looks like a Japanese baby painted brown, and has a friendly smile
even for a stranger. It is amusing to watch the women meeting a
fashionably dressed lady in one of the shops; then they surround
her laughing, amazed and admiring, but they do not appear to be
jealous of the lace dresses worn by European women. The men,
on the other hand, do not honor even the most beautiful and most
elegant white lady with so much as a glance.

142 The Cayapa girls are pretty from the age of 12 to 16 years,
302 their bodies somewhat plump, but still with a beautiful shape.
584 Sometimes young men and women can be seen with red and black
streaks and dots on their faces, chest, arms and legs; this is a
sign that they are engaged.

505 Once their business in town is finished they prepare for the re-
turn journey to their villages. "Adios compadre, adios compadres,"
and chattering and laughing, happy and content, they hurry to
the shore where their canoes are moored. On their way they

505 might hear a piano or phonograph music from somewhere. That they still must quickly take a look at. The entire crowd rushes busily into the house concerned and up the stairs. Their curiosity is soon satisfied and they come down again and now they must be off quickly so as to be able to make use of the tide current. Their
501 unpainted canoes are 8 to 10 meters (Translator--about 8 to 10 yds.) in length and from 70 to 90 centimeters (Translator--2 1/3 to 3 ft.) in width. They are slim and pleasing in shape and have
[531] black colored decorations around the edges. Each one of them accommodates from 5 to 8 persons, close together, with their meager belongings. They paddle along nimbly with their leaf-shaped oars and, while their canoes glide along silently and swiftly, the entire crowd has soon disappeared in the mouth of the
484 Mira River. It will take them two days to reach their hometowns.
648 During the journey they camp in the open over night, somewhere along the shore, in an empty pasture. But they have to be careful. Occasionally they are attacked and robbed there by Negroes, and if they resist, they are murdered in cold blood. Only recently a whole group of them, men, women and children, 14 persons altogether, were most cruelly murdered on the Mira River by some bestial Negroes.

101 [285] However, our friends will now have arrived home safe
342 and sound on the upper Cayapa River. They are greeted from afar
361 by the friendly smoke of their own hearths. Their villages con-
824 sist of a few, widely dispersed bamboo huts of a most primitive type. A few uncut tree trunks have simply been rammed into the earth in a rectangle. The floor is at a height of 3 to 4 meters (Translator--ca. 3 to 4 yds.) and is made of split bamboo. Above this, at an equal distance, is the roof made of coconut (?) palm (Steinnusspalme) leaves. That is the entire structure. Since these houses have no walls, it is obivous that doors and windows are not
417 required either. The trunk of the Ceiba trees, light as a cork,
824 into which a few steps are hewn, serves as stairs. (The Ceiba tree
512 produces the silk-like balsa wool, called "Kapok" on the European market.) These stairs are obliquely leaned on, without being fastened anywhere. A hen-roost can be climbed more easily than one of these Cayapa ladders. In order to be somewhat safe from surprises by unwanted visitors, the ladders are drawn up to the living quarters overnight, and when a family goes on a trip, the ladder is thrown into the river and left to float away. After
322 all it is so simple and easy to fetch another Ceiba trunk from the nearby forest on returning and quickly hack a few step-like cuts into it with a chopping knife.

352 And the life of these Indians is as simple and primitive as
412 their houses. They have no furniture of any kind, they squat and
513 sleep on the floor. As for tools, the only ones they have are cooking utensils and what they need for their canoe trips and for hunt-
622 ing and fishing. Each district has its Gobernador or cacique, who rules with an iron hand and keeps order. Around Easter they have
796 a few penalty and penance days, when the chieftain executes sentences of whipping on all those who have committed misdeeds
656 in the course of the year. The government in Quito does not interfere at all with the Cayapa, as they know that these peaceful Indians never get into trouble and never present problems.

584 The love and marriage life of the Cayapa is on a morally very
583 high level. If a young man falls in love with a girl, his father turns match-maker and goes to see the girl's parents. If the young man is acceptable, they demand as high a dowry as possible, consisting of canoes, domestic animals, utensils and food. They will not part with their daughter without receiving a *good price* for her. In other words, the procedure is exactly the reverse from what it is in Europe, where the young lady has to be outfitted with a dowry in order to find a man.

582 In order to find out now whether the enamored young Cayapa
583 is actually of marriageable age and in a position to support a
[411] family, he is sent into the forest with a blowgun, bow and arrows, i. e. with weapons which he can manufacture himself, in order to kill a Sahino (type of wild boar). If he succeeds in this hunting feat, he has proved his capability, and the wedding may take place. Beforehand, however, he is sent to see the cacique, who will explain to him that marriage not only brings pleasures, but also troubles, asking him, whether he is prepared to suffer these. It is obvious that the answer is always yes. And now he has to undergo the test. He has to bare his back, on which the cacique will administer a hundred blows (well-counted on fingers and toes) with the ship. If the fiancé has neither cried out nor dodged, but bore the whipping with courage and steadfastness, even though his teeth may have been clenched, he has successfully passed the test [286] and the ceremony may be completed by the cacique.

585 A banquet is organized. Whatever the fields, forest and rivers
[273] can yield in terms of potables will be turned into food which will be accompanied by great quantities of Chicha, Guarapo and Masato (corn, cane-sugar and banana beverages). All the village inhabit-
[415] ants will attend the festivities. Many of them show how practical

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[415] they are by bringing along "Mates" and "Calabazas," i.e. bowls and pitchers made of the rind of pumpkin-like fruit, into which they put the greatest part of the food and drink offered in order to carry them home. Only when everybody has eaten until he is ready to burst and the majority are rather drunk, the wedding draws to a close. The young couple is finally left alone and may go to their hut. But before the couple are allowed to enjoy their love to the full, they must pass through a long cruel (because it is continent) trial period. They live and sleep together under their
[286] common mosquito-net made of cotton with red flowers, but not as husband and wife, but as brother and sister, and they are not allowed to touch each other for an entire year. They must remain pious, chaste and abstemious, no matter how difficult it may be for them. The purpose is to steel the virtue of abstemiousness and the strength of will. Only when this period of fasting and trial is over, may they succumb to the ecstasies of love. Woe to those
684 who cannot withstand and secretely attempt to taste of the forbidden fruit before the end of the trial year—if discovered they pay for their crime with their lives or have to seek refuge immediately in another territory which cannot be reached by the punishing arm of their strict rulers. Only once I had occasion to watch how a fiancé, who was violently in love, gingerly and furtively with trembling hands touched the arm and naked breast of his betrothed.

302 During this year of betrothal they use red and black plant juices
584 to paint their faces, chests, arms and legs with streaks and dots. This custom corresponds to our engagement announcements and wedding rings.

846 Immediately after the birth of a baby, the young mother gets
[515] up from her bed, goes to the river and bathes. Bathing in the river is one of the Cayapas' passions. Each and everyone of them take at least two or even three baths per day. The young mother has barely left her child when the grandmother cleans it up a bit, puts it down again; and then the father lies down with it, staying in bed with the child from three to five weeks, letting his wife nurse him, just as though he were the woman in child-bed, who had gone through the pains of childbirth and was in need of recuperating and nursing care. The young mother, on the other hand, does her usual work already an hour after delivery, attending to her daily chores as though nothing had happened. This strange custom is connected with their religious concepts and their fear of evil spirits

846 and demons; on the other hand it also aims at inducing the father to identify himself intimately with the child. Obviously the women, for whom these customs do not provide the least amount of consideration, quickly lose their earlier beauty and after a few years, they wilt and become horribly ugly.

594 511 [545 837] [287] [401] The marriage of the Cayapa is most harmonious. They do not have polygamy or polyandry, and adultery never occurs or only very rarely. Women or girls who have relationships with white or black men or those of any other race, are killed without pity. In fact they are even forbidden to enter into innocent conversation with such men under threat of severe penalty. If one of the spouses dies, they do not remarry, remaining faithful to the [764] dead. The dead are only buried when the corpse is already in a state of decomposition and when the pestilent smell has become unbearable.

574 648 While the villagers and inhabitants of other races in these parts are very hospitable and will always offer hospitality to travelers, no matter how poor they are, even without expecting any remuneration, the Cayapa are an exception to this rule. They fear strangers on account of their women, who are not always safe from them; but most particularly they hate the Negroes who have repeatedly attacked their women forcibly. For this reason it is not easy to obtain shelter in Cayapa villages. As they have frequently also been robbed and mistreated by Negroes, they leave their huts as soon as a Negro settles in the neighborhood, and keep on withdrawing further inland. Thus they have already completely disappeared from the banks of the Santiago River and the lower course of the Cayapa River.

[35 316 [301] There still is a lot of gold in their region, as indeed there are small layers of alluvial gold in all these rivers. But these Indians, with the exception of a few, more modern minded, and the renegades, do not collect it, nor do they wear gold ornaments. On the other hand none of them would tell a stranger where the yellow metal could be found, even if he were offered a fortune for his secret. From the Cayapa point of view gold is an accursed thing, which brought the white and the black devils into the country and was responsible for their being pushed back into the interior and [446] robbed of their dominion. The Negroes, however, are their sworn enemies because they have too often had to suffer bitter injustice from them.

|8| Left to themselves and untouched, the Cayapa are gay, content and happy. Politics and book knowledge do not trouble them. The forest, fields and rivers yield in abundance everything they need for living. They know all the medicinal herbs and roots of [24] their region and know exactly which will protect them against snake bites and which one will cure their toothaches. The administration of the community is in good hands and does not cost anything; they do not have to pay taxes or tributes. They do not bother with what goes on in the cities of the white men and the outside world. Their main concerns are the instincts of nature, women and children, eating and drinking; they are indifferent to everything else, because they neither know nor understand it. Their simple and carefree life makes them happy--they are richer than we who, as a result of rushing and ambitious pushing, cannot find peace and happiness. They are happier in their ignorance than we, who proudly call our thin varnish of culture "civilization" and who scornfully characterize the Cayapa as "savages."

1: Heimann--10 F-4,5 (1895-1938)1932 SD6 Cayapa SD6

Illus. 1. Cayapa Indians (with two Colombians).